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ABSTRACT

This paper first presents a rationale for involving fathers in early literacy development and then offers a model for training fathers of children at-risk or with disabilities. Previous research has found two reasons given by fathers for their involvement in literacy development: first, to provide a "head start" in reading and writing, and, second, to increase bonding. Project DADS (Dads as Developmental Specialists) is based on a model which involves recruitment of fathers and authentic observation in which emerging child behaviors and the father's matching facilitating behaviors are identified prior to training. Next the Project DADS study is described. Between March and October 1999, Project DADS provided 8 hours of training to 90 fathers of young (birth through age 5) children with disabilities. This study is investigating the following questions: (1) what are the demographics of the volunteer trainees and their children? (2) what are the perceptions of trainees concerning the value of father-child literacy activities? (3) what is the attrition rate for participating fathers and the reasons given? (4) what are the trainees' current literacy practices? (5) what are the fathers' perceived strengths and weaknesses regarding father-child literacy? (6) what child-literacy goals do the fathers set for themselves and their children? and (7) to what extent are the fathers successful in implementing the knowledge, skills and attitudes developed in the training program? Contains 23 references. (DB)

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Working with Fathers of Young Children with Disabilities to Develop Print Literacy

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Working with Fathers of Young Children with Disabilities

to Develop Print Literacy

During the 1990s, adult illiteracy has been one of the major public concerns in the U.S. Marvin and Mirenda (1993) summarized the data on this topic in the following way:

> Approximately 20% of the adults/high school graduates have difficulty with common reading tasks [while] 13% cannot read at all....The data for school-age individuals suggest that this problem continues in the current generation of adolescents; for example, it appears that 40% of 13-year-olds in U.S. schools are unsuccessful at grade-level reading assignments. (p. 351)

Paralleling this concern is an increase in attention of early childhood leaders toward *emerging literacy* (e.g., infant responses and initiations such as exploring with eyes, mouth and ears) paired with matching adult facilitating behaviors (Brueggeman, 1998). The emerging literacy perspective suggests that economically disadvantaged homes may contribute to the literacy problem because they often lack environmental factors correlated with literacy such as availability of printed materials and writing utensils, adult-child interactions with literacy materials, guided television watching, interactive book reading, and parental aspirations toward education (Marvin, & Mirenda, 1993).

Children with disabilities living in impoverished environments face even greater risks in relation to literacy development because of low parental expectation levels. For example, Light and Kelford-Smith (1993) found that parents of young children with disabilities ranked making friends and development of communication and self-care above literacy development while parents of their non-disabled peers gave literacy a higher priority.

The importance of parent involvement in relation to children's educational achievement is well documented in the literature (Epstein, 1987; see also Epstein,1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Wilson, 1991). In particular, parent involvement has had important short-and long-term effects in the area of literacy development

(Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; see also Cairney & Muncey, 1995; Cooper, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan,1991; Mason, 1992; Morrow, 1997). While early childhood leaders have long encouraged participation of mothers, they have only recently begun to assert a need to involve *fathers* (Fagan, 1996; McBride & Rane, 1997).

In this paper we present a rationale for involvement of fathers in early literacy development, a model for training them, and research questions addressed during the current academic year. Although many writers include listening, speaking, and thinking in their definitions of literacy, we have delimited it to *print literacy* (i.e., reading and writing) in the work described herein.

Involvement of Fathers in Development of Print Literacy

Over a recent three-year period, 60 fathers from Southern New Mexico reported involvement in literacy activities with their children, ages' three to eight. All children were at-risk or exceptional and attended early childhood programs such as public school preschools for children with developmental disabilities. The fathers and their children participated in Project DADS (Dads as Developmental Specialists) at New Mexico State University. Two distinct themes emerged in reasons given to us by the fathers for their involvement: (a) to provide a "*head start*" in reading and writing, and (b) to increase bonding (Ortiz, Stile & Brown, in press).

However, these fathers had received little if any guidance or comment from their children's teachers, and were only a small percentage of the target population of fathers initially contacted by the authors. This reflects practice and applied research in children's literacy that has traditionally focused upon mother-child; not father-child interaction (Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

A Model for Training Fathers

Early childhood personnel can expand literacy activity of fathers and their young at-risk and exceptional children by explaining the benefits of male involvement, suggesting appropriate

activities and materials, and by sharing expectations. Expansion of male involvement is especially important in inclusive early childhood settings where research has only recently begun to focus on literacy of younger children with developmental delays or disabilities (Cousin, Weekley & Gerard, 1993; Patzer & Pettegrew, 1996; Zucker, 1993). Toward this goal, fathers who already engage in literacy activities with their children can serve as mentors for other interested fathers who may need assistance. *Recruitment* of fathers is step one in our model for training fathers described in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Step two is *authentic observation* (Trussel-Cullen, 1996). In this step, we observe fathers and children as they interact in their environments. This step employs Brugglemans's *Early Literacy Scale* (1998) to identify emerging child behaviors in traditional domains, as well as response and initiations to language used in books, songs, etc., and the adult's matching facilitating behavior. The observer checks items on the scale and records anecdotal notes.

Project DADS has identified four approaches for providing early literacy activities. These approaches are: (a) early social interaction, (b) reading books & writing, (c) environmental print, and (d) school-home interaction (see also Stile & Ortiz; Ortiz, Stile & Brown, in press). According to Ortiz (1994), fathers can carry out planned or unplanned literacy activities either in or out of the home. Training in these four approaches constitutes steps' three through six in the Project DADS model. We evaluate fathers' progress in step seven and provide assistance as appropriate.

Research Questions

Between March and October 1999, Project DADS will provide eight hours of training to 90 fathers organized into nine cohorts. Children of participating fathers will be ages' birth through five with disabilities. We will address the following research questions during these sessions: (a) what are the demographics of our volunteer trainees and their children?, (b) what are the perceptions of trainees concerning the value of father-child literacy activities?, (c) what is

the attrition rate for each cohort and the reasons given?, (d) what are the trainees' current literacy practices?, (e) what are the fathers' perceived strengths and weaknesses regarding father-child literacy, (f) what child-literacy goals do the fathers set for themselves and their children, and (g) to what extent are the fathers successful in implementing the knowledge, skills and attitudes obtained in our training program?

Conclusion

As Treacle-Culled (1996) has suggested, "the foundations of literacy are laid at home during the early years (p. 176)." In this paper, we have provided a rationale for involvement of fathers in providing these foundations, described the Project DADS training model, and listed our research questions for the current academic year. On the basis of our presentation, we hope that interested participants will attempt to apply the Project DADS model at home to promote early literacy activities among local fathers and their young children with disabilities.

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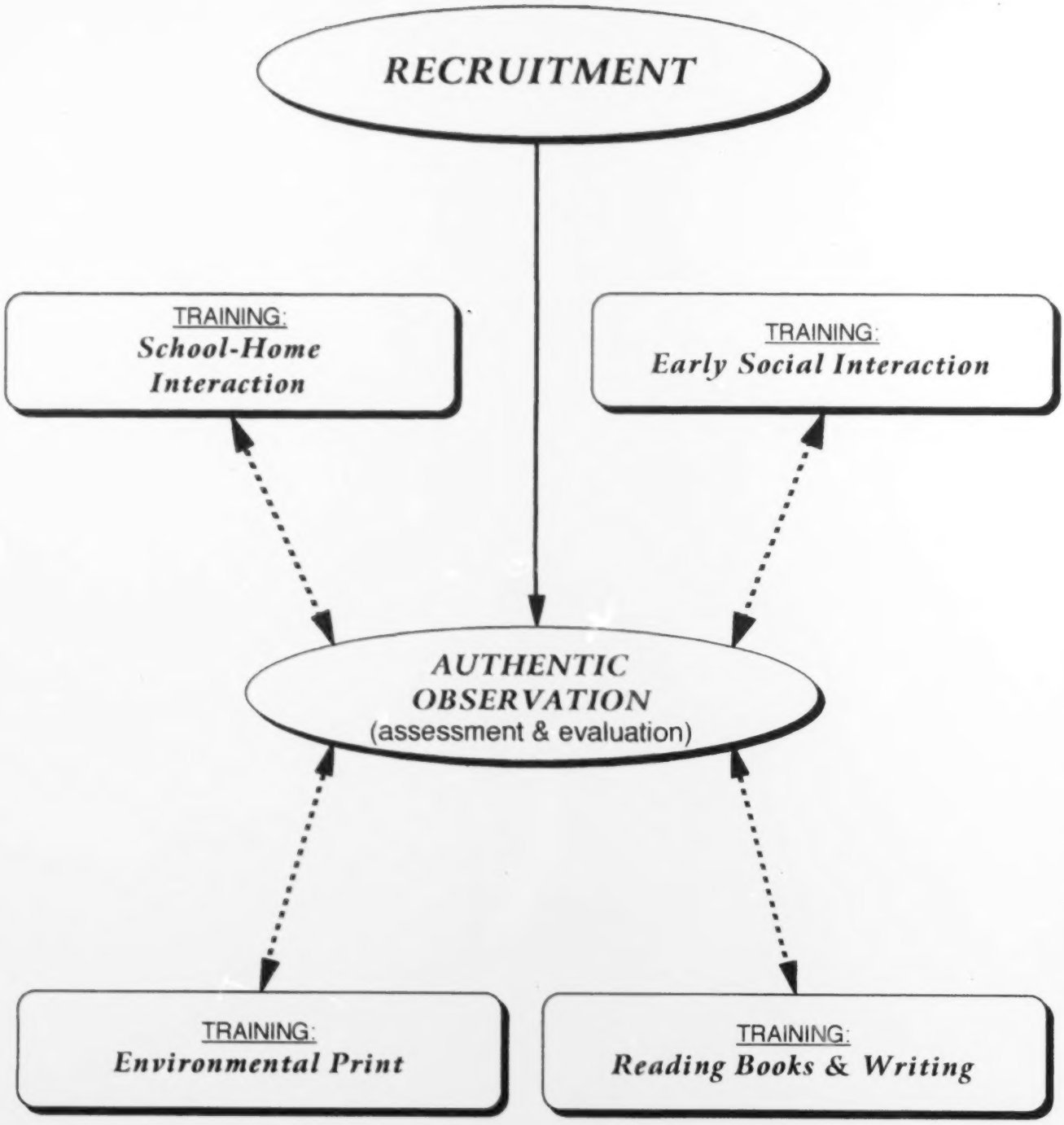

Figure 1. Project DADS Training Model